



White Women, Black Men: Illicit Sex in the Nineteenth-Century South

By Martha Hodes

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This book is the first to explore the history of a powerful category of illicit sex in America's past: liaisons between Southern white women and black men. Martha Hodes tells a series of stories about such liaisons in the years before the Civil War, explores the complex ways in which white Southerners tolerated them in the slave South, and shows how and why these responses changed with emancipation.

Hodes provides details of the wedding of a white servant-woman and a slave man in 1681, an antebellum rape accusation that uncovered a relationship between an unmarried white woman and a slave, and a divorce plea from a white farmer based on an adulterous affair between his wife and a neighborhood slave.

Drawing on sources that include courtroom testimony, legislative petitions, pardon pleas, and congressional testimony, she presents the voices of the authorities, eyewitnesses, and the transgressors themselves?and these voices seem to say that in the slave South, whites were not overwhelmingly concerned about such liaisons, beyond the racial and legal status of the children that were produced. Only with the advent of black freedom did the issue move beyond neighborhood dramas and into the arena of politics, becoming a much more serious taboo than it had ever been before. Hodes gives vivid examples of the violence that followed the upheaval of war, when black men and white women were targeted by the Ku Klux Klan and unprecedented white rage and terrorism against such liaisons began to erupt. An era of terror and lynchings was inaugurated, and the legacy of these sexual politics lingered well into the twentieth century.

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By *Martha Hodes*

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White Women, Black Men: Illicit Sex in the Nineteenth-Century South By Martha Hodes Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #601518 in Books
- Published on: 1999-01-11
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 9.24" h x .94" w x 6.10" l, 1.04 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 352 pages



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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

White Women, Black Men is a fascinating study of a category of interracial relationships that conventional wisdom has held did not exist: liaisons (the term author Martha Hodes prefers) between black men and white women in the antebellum South. Hodes shows how such relationships were tolerated, though not encouraged, to a surprising degree before the Civil War. In a fascinating feat of historical detective work, she uses court documents and other records in cases involving racial status, rape, divorce, and property, to explore the nature of these relationships. She shows white women who voluntarily gave up their privileged status to cohabit with black men, and white communities that turned a blind eye toward such unions. It was not until after the Civil War--when freedom for blacks meant Southern whites needed new ways to enforce their putative superiority--that black men were routinely punished with violence for real, or imagined, relationships with white women.

From Library Journal

Hodes (history, New York Univ.) provides the first real scholarly exploration of this important topic. Relying primarily on legal documents and testimony generated by court cases, Hodes gives us several detailed case studies. She finds that before the Civil War, whites generally did not react violently to cases of interracial liaison but rather displayed a complex range of attitudes, from indifference to concern (especially if children resulted from the "connection"). In the postbellum period, however, whites often responded with extreme violence to any hint of miscegenation. Indeed, in an effort to diminish black political power, whites often invented incidents of interracial contact and reacted accordingly. A brilliant work, imaginatively researched and well written. Highly recommended. ?Anthony O. Edmonds, Ball State Univ., Muncie, Ind.

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About the Author

Martha Hodes is assistant professor of history at New York University.

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